

Walk Your World: Destination: Old Kelsey Trail

Written by by Haven Livingston • Special to the Triplicate October 10, 2011 11:03 am

Bridging our past to our future in the Smith River NRA



ABOVE: A portion of the trail follows Canthook Creek. Photos courtesy of Haven Livingston

Sneak previews have been coming out about the grand Old Kelsey Trail revival over the past year, and parts of the trail have already been opened for hiking. Now work has been completed on the entire 7-mile stretch between Boulder Creek and Big Flat Campground. It is ready for visitors to walk, bike or ride horses on any part of it, or use it to connect with the Coast to Crest Trail linking the Coastal Trail with the Pacific Crest Trail.

The historic route that the Kelsey Trail follows runs along the Smith River and into the Siskiyou Mountains. It was originally followed by native people, and then in 1855 Ben Kelsey was contracted to construct a trail from Crescent City to Fort Jones to keep the fort supplied with food and essentials

It also connected Scott Valley, Yreka and other Siskiyou mountain camps.

Mule trains of 30–40 animals were used to carry supplies through the rocky river canyons and over steep passes. Unlike a horse's scraping hoof, a mule's gait stamps straight down with all its weight, making it the ideal weight-bearing beast for the narrow and winding trail that was the original Kelsey route. A side-effect of the mules was compaction of the trail from their hooves into such a dense surface that much of the original trail from over 100 years ago is still intact and visible today with no vegetation growing up through it.

The trail was used until 1909, when Highway 199 was completed along the Middle Fork Smith River, making travel by stagecoach possible and easier than the wild mule trek through the mountains.



Hikers ford the South Fork of the Smith River — before the recent rains — on the Old Kelsey Trail. Photos courtesy of Haven Livingston

Resurrecting the trail was the idea of local resident Clarke Moore, who was searching for a better path between his house on Boulder Creek and a swimming hole on the South Fork Smith when he stumbled onto a part of the old trail.

Researching the history of the Kelsey Trail, Moore discovered its historic role as part of the larger trail system of California. He saw the opportunity for more than just a trail to a beautiful swimming spot on the Smith River.

"This is the bridge we have to the past and the one that can take us into the future," he said when asked why the trail became important to him.

Abundant fish and wildlife, mining scars and regrown clear-cuts are clues that teach us why this area was important to early people. It is special and important to us now, as a place to retreat, slow down and recharge our spirits with wildness and beauty.

With funding from the California River Parkway Grant Program and the support of Rose Foundation project manager Kevin Hendrick, Moore became the Coast to Crest Trail supervisor, and along with Don Pass of the U.S. Forest Service did most of the original scoping for the revival of the Old Kelsey Trail. This was a grueling task which required scrambling through dense brush and thickets that had overgrown the trail, concealing it in many places. Some stretches of trail were too steep to be enjoyable for hikers or had slid out completely and had to be rerouted.

The California Conservation Corps went to work after the path had been found and flagged. They dug, chopped and constructed their way through miles of land, creating a well-built, freshly cleared trail.

Today there are two main trailheads for the Old Kelsey Trail; one is 9.2 miles up South Fork Road from the Highway 199 turnoff, and another is at the Big Flat Campground on Road 405 off Big Flat Road. Trail map signs and information will be installed at the trailheads this fall. Shorter sections of the trail can be accessed by South Fork Road and Road 15N11, an unpaved branch off of 405 (the Big Flat Campground road).

The official trailhead at the western end of the Old Kelsey Trail is also the beginning of a 2-mile section referred to as the "Boulder Creek section." It starts near Boulder Creek, a tributary to the South Fork Smith, and heads upstream toward the Gordon Creek river access where it climbs back up to meet South Fork Road. Hikers going through walk southeast for about 10 minutes on the South Fork Road before dropping back down to the river to begin the section dubbed "Ford to Canthook Creek."

The Ford to Canthook section of trail is accessed at approximately mile 10.2 on South Fork Road. From the ford, this section of trail follows Canthook Creek upstream past a few forgotten Douglas Fir and Port Orford Cedar giants before marching up and over a ridge into densely forested hillsides of the Hurdygurdy Creek basin.

These unusual place names are drawn from tools used during the period of resource-extraction from the area. A "hurdy gurdy" is generally thought of as an instrument, but in this case "hurdy gurdy" refers to a water wheel with radial buckets driven by a jet for use in mining. "Cant hooks" were used in logging and consist of a long wooden handle with a movable hook at one end.

The "ford" part of the trail comes about a mile after dropping back down from South Fork Road and is quite literally fording across the South Fork of the Smith River, making this section something you would only want to attempt at low water. If you don't bring sandals for the crossing prepare to get your shoes wet because the water, even when low, can still be 2 1/2 feet deep, and the rocky bottom makes it dangerous to traverse barefoot.

Reaching this ford could be a worthwhile destination for those who are forever in search of yet another great swimming hole. Rock-hopping downstream from the shallow ford on the opposite bank takes you to a deep pool armored by steep rock walls. The best way to enter this pool is to make like a river otter and slither your way down a cobble bar into the deep blue oasis. This glittering pool is a fabulous destination on a hot day.

Continuing east from the ford, the trail weaves through a mosaic of giant old-growth Douglas Fir and Port Orford Cedar trees along Canthook Creek. Big boulders and logs for resting on at the crossing points over Canthook Creek make for good lunch spots along the trail. Lyrical sounds of water and small cascading waterfalls provide a scenic and relaxing backdrop.

Climbing up the trail and into the Hurdygurdy basin you move into another realm with densely growing Douglas Fir and only wisps of filtered light reaching the forest floor. This area was once logged and replanted, but then neglected of further thinning, leaving the trees to grow tall and spindly instead of broad and healthy. The Forest Service plans to thin the trees, which will rejuvenate the stand with light and greater diversity.

A final crossing over Hurdygurdy creek leads to Fox Flat. Here the trail becomes one with the All Access Trail and over the next couple of miles winds its way back to Big Creek Campground via Chimney Flat.

With the closest trailhead only 30 minutes from Crescent City, these seven miles of trail take hikers through a world of

diverse forest and riparian habitats, revealing nature's secrets at a walking pace. Whether hiking this as a day trip or taking the time to travel the entire Coast to Crest, you will come away with a sense of renewal from breathing deep of the wilderness and being washed with clean, clear river water.

TRAIL NOTES

THE HIKE: An historic route on the old Kelsey Trail that can be walked in short 2- or 5-mile segments or a day hike of 7 miles. Different sections follow the South Fork Smith River, Hurdygurdy and Canthook Creek, which are tributaries to the South Fork.

HIGHLIGHTS: Variations of forest from old growth Douglas Fir to dense second growth, lunch spots at the creek crossings with musical cascading water, and a deep swimming hole at the ford of the South Fork Smith River.

SWEAT LEVEL: The 2-mile section along the South Fork is a gently rolling easy walk with a short steep climb at the end to reach the road. The trail from the ford on the South Fork to the east is a steady climb up Canthook Creek with some ups and downs and finally down to cross Hurdygurdy Creek. This section is a hearty walk. Its shady nature will keep you from overheating, but with a moderate pace expect to work up a lather.

GETTING THERE: From the west take U.S. Highway 199 past Hiouchi, turn right to cross the middle and south forks of the Smith River on South Fork Road. The western trailhead is 9.2 miles from the turn-off from Hwy. 199. Continue up South Fork Road for 1 mile to start at the ford segment or drive 5 miles to Big Flat Campground to reach the eastern trailhead at Big Flat Campground. You can also connect to the trail at Chimney Flat, Fox Flat or on Road 15N11, a branch off of Big Flat Road. No map currently shows the new trail sections. Your best bet is to buy the National Geographic Redwood National and State Parks map and stop by the U.S. Forest Service Visitor Center in Gasquet where they can draw the trail on your map and give you more information. The center's phone number is (707) 457-3131

Walk Your World: GORGEOUS Gordon

Written by [Richard Wiens](#), [The Triplicate](#) October 16, 2012 10:09 am

Trace South Fork from above, then take the plunge



The Del Norte Triplicate/Richard Wiens The Smith River's South Fork is beautiful viewed from the the Boulder Creek section of the Kelsey Trail, above, or from the water's edge at Gordon Gorge.

Say you tire of the coastal cool and simply want to add 20 degrees to your day.

Or you're looking for a remote swimming hole, a place to sprawl on a patch of sand and flat river rocks.

Or you've been hankering to check out a recently restored section of a historic trail that used to be plied by mule trains connecting Crescent City to Siskiyou.

There are so many reasons to embark on the old Kelsey Trail just off South Fork Road that Laura and I were a bit surprised to find ourselves alone from start to finish last Sunday. But then, solitude amid the splendor is yet another reason to go.

When the fog rolled over Pebble Beach, we decided it wasn't a Coastal Trail kind of day. But the blue sky shone through almost as soon as we got on U.S. Highway 199, and by the time we were driving South Fork Road, the temperature seemed to jump in 5-degree increments every time we glanced at the dashboard thermostat.

It's nine miles from the highway to the Boulder Creek trailhead, a well-marked pull-off on the left side of the road. A big sign features a quick history lesson and a map of the seven-mile stretch of the Kelsey Trail starting here and meandering generally to the east all the way to the Big Flat Campground.

This day, we planned to take in only the two-mile Boulder Creek section, and we ended up not quite completing even that much — for a very pleasant reason.

Members of the welcoming committee included bark-shedding madrones, waist-high ferns and wild rhododendrons in full bloom — along with some unwelcoming poison oak. They ushered us toward the marathon main attraction, a path that tracked the route of the Smith River's South Fork.

The heavily foliated path afforded tantalizingly partial glimpses of the liquid jade maybe 100 feet below. The trick was to be like a mule and keep securely to the sometimes precipitous trail while still appreciating those river views. At least we weren't carrying 300-pound packs on our backs like the four-legged travelers of the 1800s trudging from Crescent City to Fort Jones and back.

It was a mile and a half of warm-weather bliss along a trail cut into the rocky hillside and dotted with occasional old growth (redwoods and Doug firs) and trickling runoff. If you take this hike with children, don't let them run ahead — the path sometimes narrows as you round a bend. Another note: listen for dramatic changes in the sound of the river along the way, caused by rapids, calm stretches of water, the breeze and the trail's topography.

When we reached a turnoff for the Gordon Gorge Trail, we were tempted to descend to the river immediately. Instead we walked a bit farther and entered a steep climb. Realizing this route was headed up to a rendezvous with South Fork Road and eventually a second section of the Kelsey Trail, we turned around and gave into that temptation.

This was one of those times when downhill was harder than uphill — those mules of yesteryear probably eschewed this side trail entirely. Us humanoids took our time, especially when we came to a precarious but photogenic stream fed by two burbling fingers of runoff and offering just enough rocks to pick our way across.

Soon enough we reached the South Fork's edge at an idyllic spot that would have made for quite the swimming hole if the temperature had been a bit hotter and the river a bit slower. Gordon Gorge would make a great summer destination even more easily accessed by the second Kelsey trailhead off South Fork Road, just a mile past the Boulder Creek trailhead for cars or two miles for hikers.

We set up shop on some flat rocks, breaking out the provisions and soaking up the scenery as the water raced by. It seemed right to have the river up close and personal after gazing at it from afar for most of the journey — we were in no hurry to start the return trip.

For all the lollygagging, we were still back to our car at the Boulder Creek trailhead less than three hours after we had set out.

Our first taste of the Kelsey Trail left us hungry for more.

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TRAIL NOTES

THE HIKE: A newly restored two-mile stretch of the old Kelsey Trail, with a side trail to Gordon Gorge.

HIGHLIGHTS: Great views of the Smith River's South Fork, from above while on the Kelsey Trail and at the river's edge after descending Gordon Gorge Trail.

SWEAT LEVEL: The Boulder Creek section of the Kelsey Trail is mostly level, so the sweat is heat-induced until a steep stretch at the end that Laura and I skipped. More perspiration may be shed descending and then ascending the Gordon Gorge Trail.

GETTING THERE: From U.S. Highway 199, it's nine miles to the Boulder Creek trailhead of the Kelsey Trail. There's a map on the trailhead sign, or you can get one at the U.S. Forest Service Visitor Center in Gasquet.

HISTORIC KELSEY TRAIL

1 TRADE ROUTE



PORTIONS OF THIS TRAIL follow the historic Kelsey Trail, named after Ben Kelsey, who settled in Humboldt County in 1850 and supervised Chinese immigrants constructing the trail.

One hundred miles long, the trail began in Crescent City, traveled up rocky river canyons and through steep mountain passes before ending at Fort Jones, near Yreka, California. As the primary supply route to inland towns, mule trains of 30-40 animals took 19 days to travel round-trip from the coast to mining settlements in Scott's Valley.

In use until 1909, the route was later replaced by the completion of Highway 199, which made traveling inland by stagecoach more accessible.

2 ANCIENT TREES



LONG BEFORE MULE TRAINS traveled this route, the forest along this section of trail grew virtually undisturbed for centuries.

This region's forest is particularly abundant with more than 3500 native plant species. Home to more than 20 cone-bearing tree species, it ranks among the most biologically diverse temperate coniferous forest regions in the world. Complex geology, mild climate, and abundant rainfall contribute to unique growing conditions.

Some of the old growth tree species you'll encounter along the way include coast redwood, Douglas fir, Port Orford cedar, incense cedar, red cedar, mountain hemlock, Pacific madrone, tan oak, and red alder.

STEP ONTO HISTORY

5 BIG GOLD!

THE GOLD RUSH of the 1850s brought miners to every Smith River creek staking their claims. The slow extraction methods that relied on picks, shovels, and pans were replaced by high-pressure hydraulic hoses.

At Oro Grande Mine, water was carried from the creek in an earthen channel or flume. It was forced into large canvas hoses and out through a giant iron nozzle resulting in a powerful stream of water able to move tons of rock in just a few hours.

As you walk this section, look for nearby evidence of the flume that brought water along Hurdgurdy Creek and to Big Flat. Large piles of streamside tailings and holes blasted in the ground still show the impact of hydraulic mining from 150 years ago.



FROM THE MOMENT you step onto the Historic Kelsey Trail, you travel back in time. You walk the same path and follow in the footsteps of all those who travelled this trail before you; Tolowa Indians trekking inland to fish for salmon, hunt, and trade, fortune seekers mining gold, Chinese immigrants laboring to carve out roads, mule trains carrying supplies inland from the coast, and loggers felling some of the earth's tallest trees.

3 WILD FISH

FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS, every fall and winter, runs of king and silver salmon and steelhead trout return from the open ocean to Smith River creeks and streams where they were born. No other river in California supports such a large and healthy population of wild fish.

From its headwaters, through main stems and tributaries, the wild and scenic Smith River flows and sparkles with unparalleled clarity and purity.

Though steep and rocky, Cant Hook Creek provides spawning habitat for steelhead. Water rushing over boulders and rocks creates needed oxygen and releases nutrients that help to ripen fish eggs buried in gravel.



4 TALL TIMBER

FOLLOWING WORLD WAR II, in the 1950s and 1960s, timber harvesting was booming in the Pacific Northwest. Del Norte County was home to more than 50 lumber mills. Dozens of trucks carrying huge loads of old growth redwoods and Douglas fir rumbled daily down river canyons and coast highways.

Logging methods of the period used a tall tree or 'spar' to attach high lead cables. Felled trees were hooked to one end of the cable and dragged uphill to a landing using diesel powered winches and pulleys.

After harvest, cut areas were replanted with bare root seedlings. Several decades later, thinning was done to encourage growth. In this section, second-growth fir have reached maturity and are ready for harvest. Today, helicopter logging is the preferred method for timber extraction.



Six Rivers National Forest
Smith River National Recreation Area



Trail #2E23—Old South Kelsey Trail (Historic Kelsey Trail)

Access Points

Trail Section Miles One-way Elevation (in feet)	Access Point Name	Nearest Mile Post Marker (MP) or Intersecting Road
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Access points off South Fork Road (County Road 427)—paved road. 16-19 miles/35-40 minutes from Gasquet*

Boulder Creek 2 miles 480-720'	Boulder Creek (western) Trailhead (west end of Boulder Creek Section).	MP 9.2
	East end of Boulder Creek Section and Gordon Gorge Spur Trail (2E17)	MP 10.1

There is a break in the trail between the Boulder Creek and Ford to Canthook sections; through-hikers must walk 0.3 mile along South Fork Road.

Ford to Canthook 4.4 miles 440-1520'	Ford	Access point at MP 10.5, parking at MP 10.6
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Access points off Big Flat Road (County Road 405)—gravel road, low clearance. 21-23 miles/50-60 minutes from Gasquet*

Accessible Trail 2 miles 720'	Big Flat Campground	MP 2.16
	Big Flat Road (eastern) Trailhead	MP 2.36
	Unmarked Parking Lot	MP 2.50
	Chimney Flat Picnic Area	Accessed via Road 15N57 near MP 2.85
Ford to Canthook/ Accessible Trail Intersection	Fox Flat	Accessed via Road 15N56 near MP 3.31
Ford to Canthook	Oro Grande	Accessed via Road 15N55 near MP 3.92

Access points off Forest Service Road 15N11 (intersects Big Flat Road at MP 4.98)—gravel road, high clearance recommended. 25-26 miles/1.2 hours from Gasquet*

Ford to Canthook	Road 15N11 crossing	.6 miles south of intersection with Road 405
	Spur Trail 2E23D	1.5 miles south of intersection with Road 405

*From Smith River NRA Visitor Center in Gasquet, California go 7.2 miles west on Highway 199, turn left on South Fork Road (County Road 427), and go 9.2 miles to the western trailhead; for the eastern trailhead and other access points off Big Flat Road (405) and Road 15N11, continue 4.9 miles on South Fork Road and turn left on Big Flat Road.

Historic Kelsey Trail
Boulder Creek to Big Flat Campground

Legend

- Trailhead Marker
- Trailhead
- Accessible Trail
- Points of Interest
- Roads
- Recreation River Boundary

Scale
0 0.1 0.2 0.3 0.4 0.5 Miles

Locator Map
Shows the location of the trail within the state of Oregon.

